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ABSTRACT

Noting that scholars have too willingly accepted Plato's assumption that one could not successfully be both an actor and a rhapsode (reciter or singer of epic poetry), this paper suggests that placing the "mixed style" of the rhapsode's performance art within the context of the Homeric sensibility and the cultural shift into literacy produces a more useful image of the rhapsode as both singer and actor. (FL)

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# The Rhapsode as Singer and Actor

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## The Rhapsode as Singer and Actor

The rhapsode has been considered and reconsidered by such scholars in the field of Speech as Eugene Bai n, Donald Hargis, and, most recently, Lee Hudson and Tony Lentz. Their primary aim has been to free the image of the rhapsode, in so far as possible, from the biases of scarce and "literate" accounts of an oral age. And yet it seems that our own cultural and academic dispositions have led us to accept too willingly Plato's assumption that one cannot successfully be both an actor and a rhapsode.[1] Plato is drawing a professional distinction that, given our knowledge of the separate recitative and dramatic festivals and their rivalry for public appeal,[2] seems accurate. Nevertheless, the Greek noun for delivery originally meant '"the playing of a part"'[3] and is elsewhere considered to have been used synonymously with "acting".[4] Donald Hargis suggests that, while the rhapsode was "something between a reciter and an actor, even apparently . . . a sound effects man," there is no evidence to support the notion that the rhapsode directly influenced the development of the Greek theatre and/or the actor's art.[5] And yet it seems that if we place the "mixed style"[6] of the rhapsode's performance art more squarely within the context of the Homeric sensibility and the cultural shift into literacy, we can develop a more

compelling and, finally, more useful image of the rhapsode as both singer and actor.

In "The Rhapsodes Revisited", Tony Lentz defends the rhapsode against prejudices produced by a strict interpretation of Plato's Ion. He suggests that "the religious symbolism of the staff and its relationship to divine inspiration may have been a common and accepted part of Greek culture" and that, therefore, "Socrates' praise of the rhapsode as one inspired by the gods may not have been faint praise at all." Citing evidence of the rhapsode's specialized role within and contribution towards his society, Lentz endeavors to remove "some of the sting of Plato's portrayal of Ion as an interpreter/messenger of the gods, a man who has no rational explanation of his work."[7] The rhapsode's authority derives from the traditional association of the staff with the poet-god Apollo. This societal connection of the rhapsode with the Muses and the god of reason seems sufficient "reason" to believe that the singer--if only in spirit--descended from Apollo. Lentz vindicates the rhapsode's alleged irrationality through an assertion of the "rationality" of commonly held belief. And yet, according to Morford and Lenardon, the Apollian ideal upon which this vindication is based is indeed only "part" of the Homeric mind and culture:

> Some go so far as to maintain that it is Apollo who represents the true and essential nature of the Greek spirit as reflected in the poetry of Homer, in opposition to the later foreign intrusion of the mysticism of Dionysos. Whatever kernel of

> truth this view may hold, it is important to realize that by the sixth and fifth centuries Dionysos has become an integral part of Greek civilization. He is therefore, in the classical period as characteristically Greek as Apollo, and both deities actually reflect a basic duality inherent in the Greek conception of things.

This shift from minstrel to rhapsode has been considered by Plato and his descendents[9] to have signified the degeneration of music:

> . . . as time went on, the poets themselves introduced the reign of vulgar and lawless innovation. They were men of genius, but they had no perception of what is just and lawful in music; raging like Bacchanals and possessed with inordinate delights--mingling lamentations with hymns, and paeans with dithyrambs; imitating the sounds of the flute on the lyre, and making one general confusion; ignorantly affirming that music has no truth, and whether good or bad, can only be judged of rightly by the pleasure of the hearer.[10]

Rather, with the arrival of the Thracian Dionysos, music may be considered to have undergone a change that incorporated foreign influences: it became less melodic and more percussive; the song line was fractured by a greater emphasis on stress, beat, and bass. That this shift may be tied to a shift in religious thought is indicated by Dionysos' opening speech in Euripides' The Bacchae, in which he reveals himself to the people of Thebes:

> I have raised the Bacchic cry and clothed my followers in the fawn skin and put into their hands the thyrsis--my ivy-covered shaft. I have compelled them to take up the symbols of my rituals, and all the women of Thebes--the entire female population--I have driven from their homes in frenzy . . . come

> raise the tambourines, invented by the great mother, Rhea, and by me, and native to the land of Phrygia. Come and surround the royal palace of Pentheus and beat out your din so that the city of Cadmus may see.[11]

The women, in choral frenzy, respond to such novel forms of instrumentation:

> O secret chamber on Crete, holy cavern where Zeus was born attended by the Curetes! Here the Corybantes with their three-crested helmets invented this drum of hide stretched tight for us and their ecstatic revels mingled its tense beat with the sweet alluring breath of the Phrygian flutes, and they put it into the hand of mother Rhea, so that she might beat an accompaniment to the cries of her Bacchic women.[12]

The lyre continued to be used by the early Homeric minstrel-rhapsode to set pitch, heighten emphasis, and provide occasional special effects. Hargis suggests that at this point it was a kind of stage property that, given its traditional connotations, lent dignity and authority to a performance of which it was no longer an integral part. The lyre apparently disappeared altogether, as either accompaniment or prop, with Hesiod's claim, in the eighth century, to have received his myrtle wand directly from the gods on Mt. Helicon.[13] Given the absence of musical accompaniment, "song" then probably related more specifically to '"the minstrel's attention to the poetic form, to certain characteristics of his [Homer's] hexameter, and [particularly] to his use of hiatus and [to] some apparently unmetrical features"' than to any actual song line.[14] The "singer's" intonations thus seemed to replace instrumentation

at the same time that improvisation gave way to recitation. Sinclair suggests that "hexameter had gone on by itself and left music behind."[15] Nevertheless, the notion of accompaniment survived in the body of the staff or wand with which the rhapsode was considered to have marked the beat. Sinclair suggests that with this change in "instrumentation" came an inevitable change in metrical patterning, and dates observable variations in Homeric structure to this time: "the rhythm remained dactylic but greater license in the [use] of spondees could be allowed."[16]

The incorporation of this double stress foot into the traditional hexameter is neither a simple variation of form nor an indication of poetic "lawlessness". The Greek "spondee" literally meant "libation". All drinking parties began with a libation of wine to the gods, accompanied by a "Spondeian"--a song said to have had a "calming effect". Moreover, our prosodic term "foot" orginally referred to the rhythmic beat of ancient dance steps.[17] Curiously, Hargis notes that in one of the only extant visual images of the rhapsode, the rhapsode "surprisingly . . . appears barefooted."[18] When the lyre was relinquished and the staff adopted, not only did the metrical pattern become sophisticated in such a way as to allow for a freer use of the spondee, but the singer's body became freed in such a way as to allow for a far greater range of movement and gesture. The presence of the spondee may be seen as a kind of double stamp of the foot or a double beat of the staff--and thus a proclamation of the extent to which organic rhythm and the body of the rhapsode,

as opposed to musical terminology and an external instrument, would become the containers of the "word".

Another characteristic of the metrical pattern was what Parry-Lord called "unperiodic enjambement" and what Aristotle called a "running" style which literally meant a "strung" style, "as one would string beads or a garland."[19] This paratactic structure suggests that the rhapsode's staff was a kind of needle which he used to "stitch", into a coherent though context-dependent whole, both aspects of original and inherited composition, and the diverse lays of the epic. The significance of these stylistic traits seems to lie in their active and rhythmic nature; the rhapsode manipulated formal elements and pre-composed material in such a way as to "create" a central movement upon which he hung the varying components of his song. This seems to have been the response of that period post-minstrelsy and pre-literacy when, according to Havelock, "to achieve extension of statement required the invention of an extendible rhythm."[20]

These stylistic developments seem to reflect the advent of the Dionysian "beat" culture, with its emphasis on the "downbeat", the percussive and corporeal, particularly as complemented by the rhythmic fluidity of passion. In this light, the rhapsode's staff becomes ambiguous in a way not altogether consistent with the Apollonian ideal. Even Hesiod's invocation to the Muses in his Theogony begins to look more "earthy" and less like a reflection of the "music of the spheres."[21] He claims to have received his staff, "a branch of evergreen

laurel . . . trimmed with marvelous skill" directly from the Muses on Mt. Helicon of whom he says "the dark earth echoed all around as they sang and under their feet a lovely sound leaped up."[22] Clearly, the staff derives its significance and authority from this poet-prophet's wand and only resembles, in kind and function, the Dionysian thyrsis. And yet the laurel wand itself derives from the myth of Apollo and Daphne, in which Apollo is defeated by a kind of Dionysian passion. He is stung by the one arrow his archer's art cannot repel--that of Eros. In uncontrollable ecstasy, he pursues Daphne through the woods until her pleas in favor of chastity persuade Peneus to transform her into a laurel bush. Chastity is the victor and ecstasy the path by which Apollo comes to know and value it. It was as a result of this alleged event that Apollo adopted the laurel wreath and wand as his attributes. Walter Otto contends, moreover, that though the cult of Dionysos was originally alien to Homeric religion, it is "the prototype furnished us by the displacement and absorption of pagan worship by the victorious invasions of Christian worship" that has led us to believe Apollo and Dionysos could not harmoniously coexist.[23] To the contrary, he cites numerous instances of one god being identified with the other or the two being worshipped simultaneously:

> The Olympian religion never repudiated or rejected the terrestrial but always acknowledged its sacredness. This is why the most important impulses to vitalize the Dionysiac cult issued from the Apollo of Delphi. What is more, Dionysos

> himself, lived in Delphi with Apollo, and it could even seem that he not only enjoyed equal rights with him but was the actual lord of the sacred place.[24]

The ritual and mythic worlds of both Apollo and Dionysos, as indicated by Hesiod and Euripides, are comprised of women in vegetative settings traditionally ruled by Mnemosyne. Memory's daughters are the Muses whose nature is "forgetfulness of evil and rest from cares,"[25] or the deletion of insignificant or worthless information from the consciousness. Havelock maintains that "significant communication" in Homeric Greece was always framed according to the psychological laws of memorization and that, therefore, Homer and Hesiod should be accepted "not as "poets" in the precious sense of that term" but as representatives of the Greek mind:

> In their formulaic style and their visual imagery and the like they were not behaving as a special sort of person, inspired and "gifted". They were speaking in the only idiom of which their whole culture was capable.[26]

The songs of both Homer and Hesiod provide "forgetfulness" in that they embody select, culturally significant information, divert the mind from mundane concerns, and, through the ritual of rhythmic utterance/enactment, engage the individual listener in a kind of ecstatic reunion with the community and its values.

Thus Hesiod's catalogue of the gods, and his list of directives for the farmer, Works and Days, are social textbooks that did not need to be "brought to life" by an enthusiastic teacher because, however measured and memorized, they existed only on the breath, in the condition of rhythm. While

recitation, as opposed to improvisation, indicates a degree of distance between speaker and text, subject cannot be fully divorced from object in this still oral age. The extent to which the "word" as we know it, as an observable entity distinct from the temporal act of utterance, was meaningless to the rhapsode of pre-literate Greece, was also the extent to which the rhapsode did not speak in his "own" words, did not create his text in performance in a truly lyric mode. That the rhapsode matched his body and voice to a text of which he was not the author and yet which did not exist separately from him, suggests that he was an essentially dramatic "educator"; his performance behavior was representative of what Havelock considered a fundamentally mimetic culture:

> Plato casually identifies Homer as the archetypal figure [of the Hellenic culture] for the fundamental reason that his epic was not only the prototype of all preserved communication and remained so; its compendious content and widespread performance provided a continuity within which Greek drama can be seen as imitating the content and adapting the method to a performance which, stylistically speaking, differed in degree rather than in kind, as Plato himself perceived. The Homeric background of tragedy is institutional and fundamental. It is a matter of the expanding technology of the shaped and preserved utterance, whether recited and mimed by an epic rhapsodist who himself "does" all the parts, or split up into parts by different reciters who become actors.[27]

The rhapsode's flamboyant style of delivery has been extensively described elsewhere.[28] Gilbert Murray's sense of the economy of the actor's art, however, bears examination. In the early Greek theatre, the actors were masked, wore high

buskins and long robes, and performed before thousands in the daylight: facial acting was impossible and "violent gesticulation" at least difficult; "the actors had to rely almost entirely upon the music of language as expressed by the voice":

> It was not without reason that Dionysos, the god of passion and ecstasy, was also the god of tragedy. And if we realize that actors had to rely entirely on their voices we shall better understand how Prometheus, chained unmoving to his rock, can be an effective tragic hero.[29]

Murray develops a theory of this kind of stationary actor/hero who, however confined, manages to convey strong emotion or ecstasy. It is for this same communication of "inspiration" unchecked by reason or "knowledge" that Plato condemns Ion:

> . . . as the Korybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and meter they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysos but not when they are in their right mind.[30]

The outward manifestations of the arts of the rhapsode and the actor were not dissimilar. Both dressed elaborately and participated in large, open air festivals. The rhapsode apparently used his staff to "give grandeur"[31] to his gestures and so avoid the pitfalls of "violent gesticulation" the actor was prey to. Nevertheless, the rhapsode engaged in a "mixed style" of delivery that, while characterized by a predominance of imitative behavior, incorporated the "measured recitative"

style prescribed for narrative/descriptive passages. He also played many parts, such that, at the same time that his gestures were freed and assisted by the staff, he remained somewhat stationary--not unlike Murray's tragic hero. His poetic "inspiration"--what has been characterized as a hoard of cultural information--was manifested by vocal gesture. With the diminished role of lyrical music, the spoken word became the instrument for conveying complex patterns of thought that are, at root, "poetic", and, in flower, rhythmical. That the rhapsode participated in the Dionysian spirit of the theatre before it emerged as such is clear. That the Apollonian ideal pursued by the rhapsode extended into the drama is also apparent.

Walter Otto has suggested that though the heroic myth is of itself "tragic" and that the "life of myth . . . had made its appearance in epic and choral song,"[32] it was through the immediacy of dramatic representation that the rhapsode's "text" was reborn as Greek tragedy:

> This spirit of madness in which the miracle of immediate presence became an event was the spirit which breathed new life into the tragic mythos and had it reappear in a form which manifested its high seriousness and majesty more overwhelmingly than any which had come before it.[33]

Otto's sense of the drama as a rebirth of mythos seems useful but, in the extent to which it recognizes the combined presence of Dionysos and Apollo in both the rhapsode's and actor's arts, insufficient. J. L. Styan, in his recent article "The Drama: Reason in Madness," agrees that the dramatic act is essentially

an act of madness but of what he calls "responsible" madness. That is, in the most notable theatrical productions, "the assimilation of the didactic and the sensuous" is complete;[34] Apollo and Dionysos reside in harmony. The rhapsode exploited the Dionysian power of dramatic immediacy at the same time that he maintained a level of ego consciousness consistent with the Apollonian tradition, and thus prefigured the actor. While their "texts" and festivals were distinct, both actor and rhapsode may be considered to have been "responsibly" mad in that they engaged in the art of expressing Homeric ideals through a highly mimetic and idiomatic use of voice and body.

## Notes

[1]Plato, "The Imitative Element in Poetry and Music," from The Republic, pp. 392-402, in Greek Literary Criticism, ed. J.D. Denniston, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1924), p. 57.

[2]Donald E. Hargis, "The Rhapsode," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56, No. 4 (1970), 394.

[3]Ray Nadeau, "Delivery in Ancient Times: Homer to Quintilian," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 50, No. 1 (1964), 53.

[4]Gilbert Murray, The Rise of the Greek Epic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 9.

[5]Hargis, p. 394.

[6]Ibid., p. 393. Hargis is describing a combination of Plato's "narrative" and "imitative" styles.

[7]Tony Lentz, "The Rhapsode Revisited: Notes Regarding their Divine Inspiration, Success and Recognition," Literature in Performance, 1, No. 1 (1980), 47-49.

[8]Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, Classical Mythology (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1971), p. 152.

[9]These include, among others, A. K. Kahlil and T. A. Sinclair.

[10]Plato, Laws, pp. 701-702, in Denniston, p. 99.

[11]Euripides, The Bacchae, in part in Morford and Lenardon, pp. 171-172.

[12]Ibid., p. 173.

[13]Hargis, p. 390.

[14]Ibid., p. 390, quoting C. M. Bowra, Tradition and Design in the Iliad (Oxford, 1930), p. 54.

[15]T. A. Sinclair, A History of Classical Greek Literature (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1934), p. 89.

[16]Ibid., p. 8.

[17]Ann Knudsen Kahlil, "Musicians and Music," in The Muses at Work, ed. Carl Roebuck (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), p. 243.

[18]Hargis, p. 392, referring to the image on one side of the fifth century amphora.

[19]Lee Hudson, "Between Singer and Rhapsode," Literature in Performance, 1, No. 1 (1980), 34.

[20]Eric A. Havelock, Prologue to Greek Literacy (University of Cincinnati Press, 1971), pp. 30-31.

[21]Kahlil, p. 229, referring to a sixth century Pythagorean theory.

[22]Norman Brown, trans., Hesiod: Theogony (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Co., 1976), pp. 53-55.

[23]Walter F. Otto, Dionysos: Myth and Cult (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 206-7.

[24]Ibid., p. 203.

[25]Theogony, p. 55.

[26]Eric A. Havelock, Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 138.

[27]Ibid., p. 48.

[28]See Hargis, and Bahn and Bahn.

[29]Murray, p. 9.

[30]Plato, Ion, in The Dialogues of Plato, Fourth ed., Benjamin Jowett, tr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

[31]Eugene Bahn and Margaret Bahn, A History of Oral Interpretation (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1970), p. 7.

[32]Otto, p. 209.

[33]Ibid., p. 210.

[34]J. L. Styan, "The Drama: Reason in Madness," Theatre Journal, 32, No. 3 (1980), p. 376.

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